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ABSTRACT

Once upon a time, storytelling was the medium through which people learned their history and came to make sense of their world. But after the invention of the written word, oral storytelling was foolishly cast aside and the respect for storytelling as a tool of learning was almost forgotten. This position statement by the Committee on Storytelling of the National Council of Teachers of English argues that storytelling can still be useful in the classroom. The statement first elaborates on what storytelling is and gives some reasons for including it in school, both as practiced by teachers and by students. It then offers some suggestions as to just how teachers can include storytelling for effective instruction in their classrooms. (NKA)

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Teaching Storytelling

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A Position Statement from the Committee on Storytelling

National Council of Teachers of English

Once upon a time, oral storytelling ruled. It was the medium through which people learned their history, settled their arguments, and came to make sense of the phenomena of their world. Then along came the written word with its mysterious symbols. For a while, only the rich and privileged had access to its wonders. But in time, books, signs, pamphlets, memos, cereal boxes, constitutions--countless kinds of writing appeared everywhere people turned. The ability to read and write now ruled many lands. Oral storytelling, like the simpleminded youngest brother in the olden tales, was foolishly cast aside. Oh, in casual ways people continued to tell each other stories at bedtime, across dinner tables, and around campfires, but the respect for storytelling as a tool of learning was almost forgotten.

Luckily, a few wise librarians, camp counselors, folklorists, and traditional tellers from cultures which still highly valued the oral tale kept storytelling alive. Schoolchildren at the feet of a storyteller sat mesmerized and remembered the stories till the teller came again. Teachers discovered that children could easily recall whatever historical or scientific facts they learned through story. Children realized they made pictures in their minds as they heard stories told, and they kept making pictures even as they read silently to themselves. Just hearing stories made children want to tell and write their own tales. Parents who wanted their children to have a sense of history found eager ears for the kind of story that begins, "When I was little ...." Stories, told simply from mouth to ear, once again traveled the land.

What Is Storytelling?

Storytelling is relating a tale to one or more listeners through voice and gesture. It is not the same as reading a story aloud or reciting a piece from memory or acting out a drama--though it shares common characteristics with these arts. The storyteller looks into the eyes of the audience and together they compose the tale. The storyteller begins to see and re-create, through voice and gesture, a series of mental images; the audience, from the first moment of listening, squints, stares, smiles, leans forward or falls asleep, letting the teller know whether to slow down, speed up, elaborate, or just finish. Each listener, as well as each teller, actually composes a unique set of story images derived from meanings associated with words, gestures, and sounds. The experience can be profound, exercising the thinking and touching the emotions of both teller and listener.

Why Include Storytelling in School?

Everyone who can speak can tell stories. We tell them informally as we relate the mishaps and wonders of our day-to-day lives. We gesture, exaggerate our voices, pause for effect. Listeners lean in and compose the scene of our tale in their minds. Often they are likely to be reminded of a similar tale from their own lives. These naturally learned oral skills can be used and built on in our classrooms in many ways.

Students who search their memories for details about an event as they are telling it orally will later find those details easier to capture in writing. Writing theorists value the rehearsal, or prewriting, stage of composing. Sitting in a circle and swapping personal or fictional tales is one of the best ways to help writers rehearse.

Listeners encounter both familiar and new language patterns through story. They learn new words or new contexts for already familiar words. Those who regularly hear stories, subconsciously acquire familiarity with narrative patterns and begin to predict upcoming events. Both beginning and experienced readers call on their understanding of patterns as they tackle unfamiliar texts. Then they re-create those patterns in both oral and written compositions. Learners who regularly tell stories become aware of how an audience affects a telling, and they carry that awareness into their writing.

Both tellers and listeners find a reflection of themselves in stories. Through the language of symbol, children and adults can act out through a story the fears and understandings not so easily expressed in everyday talk. Story characters represent the best and worst in humans. By exploring story territory orally, we explore ourselves--whether it be through ancient myths and folktales, literary short stories, modern picture books, or poems. Teachers who value a personal understanding of their students can learn much by noting what story a child chooses to tell and how that story is uniquely composed in the telling. Through this same process, teachers can learn a great deal about themselves.

Story is the best vehicle for passing on factual information. Historical figures and events linger in children's minds when communicated by way of a narrative. The ways of other cultures, both ancient and living, acquire honor in story. The facts about how plants and animals develop, how numbers work, or how government policy influences history--any topic, for that matter--can be incorporated into story form and made more memorable if the listener takes the story to heart.

Children at any level of schooling who do not feel as competent as their peers in reading or writing are often masterful at storytelling. The comfort zone of the oral tale can be the path by which they reach the written one. Tellers who become very familiar with even one tale by retelling it often, learn that literature carries new meaning with each new encounter. Students working in pairs or in small storytelling groups learn to negotiate the meaning of a tale.

How Do You Include Storytelling in School?

Teachers who tell personal stories about their past or present lives model for students the way to recall sensory detail. Listeners can relate the most vivid images from the stories they have heard or tell back a memory the story evokes in them. They can be instructed to observe the natural storytelling taking place around them each day, noting how people use gesture and facial expression, body language, and variety in tone of voice to get the story across.

Stories can also be rehearsed. Again, the teacher's modeling of a prepared telling can introduce students to the techniques of eye contact, dramatic placement of a character within a scene, use of character voices, and more. If students spend time rehearsing a story, they become comfortable using a variety of techniques. However, it is important to remember that storytelling is communication, from the teller to the audience, not just acting or performing.

Storytellers can draft a story the same way writers draft. Audiotape or videotape recordings can offer the storyteller a chance to be reflective about the process of telling. Listeners can give feedback about where the telling engaged them most. Learning logs kept through- out a storytelling unit allow both teacher and students to write about the thinking that goes into choosing a story, mapping its scenes, coming to know its characters, deciding on detail to include or exclude.

Like writers, student storytellers learn from models. Teachers who tell personal stories or go through the process of learning to tell folk or literary tales make the most credible models. Visiting storytellers or professional tellers on audiotapes or videotapes offer students a variety of styles. Often a community historian or folklorist has a repertoire of local tales. Older students both learn and teach when they take their tales to younger audiences or community agencies. Once you get storytelling going, there is no telling where it will take you.

Oral storytelling is regaining its position of respect in communities where hundreds of people of every age gather together for festivals in celebration of its power. Schools and preservice college courses are gradually giving it curriculum space as well. It is unsurpassed as a tool for learning about ourselves, about the ever-increasing information available to us, and about the thoughts and feelings of others.

The simpleminded youngest brother in olden tales, while disregarded for a while, won the treasure in the end every time. The NCTE Committee on Storytelling invites you to reach for a treasure--the riches of storytelling.